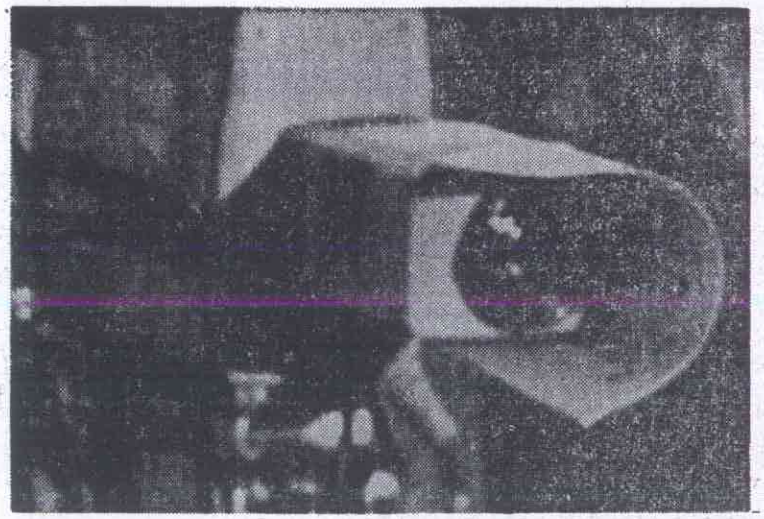


Television

Ford and NBC: Inviting Trouble

"Disturbing questions about how far NBC's Schlosser may be prepared to go in undermining, however unwittingly, the integrity of his own news department."

By Sander Vanocur

The William Morris Agency has done for Gerald Ford what it did for Barbara Walters. It has secured for the former President a multi-year contract from NBC that reportedly will pay him in the millions for doing occasional news documentaries and commentaries.

NBC President Herbert S. Schlosser issued a statement which said in part, "We are honored that President Ford has given us this unique opportunity. We are looking forward to working closely with him in developing programs that will be valuable to the American public."

Since Schlosser is actively seeking to enlist the services of Henry Kissinger for similar projects in the area of news documentaries and commentaries, his pursuit of these former government officials raises some disturbing questions about how far he may be prepared to go in undermining,however unwittingly, the integrity of his own news department.

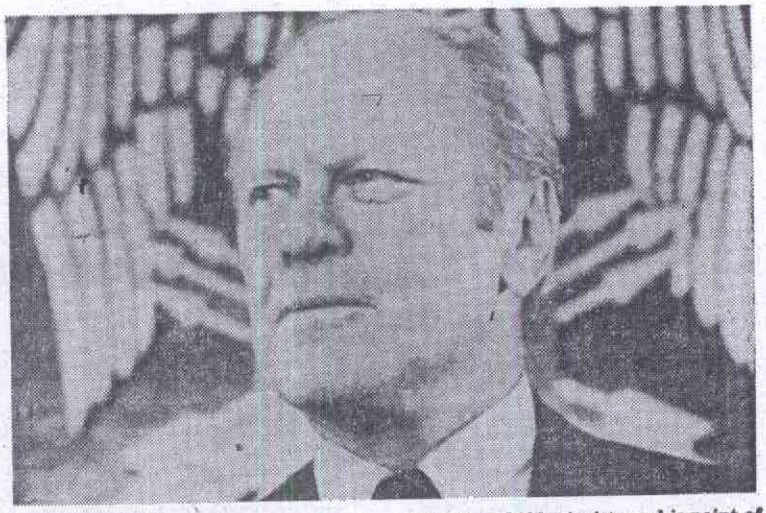
Other former Presidents have done service for a television network. Lyndon Johnson did it for CBS—whose publishing subsidiary brought out his memoirs—in a series of interviews with Walter Cronkite. Richard Nixon has been paid a huge sum by a group represented by David Frost for a series of forthcoming television interviews. So the idea of a former President appearing on television news programs and being paid for it is not new.

But what does seem new, and disturbing, about what NBC has entered into with President Ford is that line in its announcement that talked about "working closely with him (Ford) in developing programs that will be valuable to the American public." What does that statement really mean? Who will make the final editorial decisions about what goes into what the statement called "a number of television programs relating to the presidency?"

Suppose, to take one example, NBC considers doing a documentary on the decisions President Ford made when the Mayaguez was captured by the Cambodians. That is the kind of program that television networks like to make when they are doing a series of documentaries on the presidency. It has a lot of action, drama and suspense —elements that most television documentaries, especially on the presidency, singularly lack. (If Ford had been involved in Entebbe, you may be sure that a documentary would be made and shown as a made-for-television film titled "Presidential Showdown at Entebbe.")

Who is to have the final say on a documentary about the presidency? Does President Ford have it? Does his agent from the William Morris Agency have it? Or does NBC news have it? It would be nice to know.

That is the kind of trouble a network invites for its news department if it starts to enlist the services of former



high-ranking government officials to participate in its news programs.

Television news departments like to insist on maintaining the sanctity of their own news judgments in the presentation of the various news programs. They do not, for example, permit independently produced news documentaries to be seen on their networks on the grounds that they must be responsible for the news judgments contained in those documentaries.

But if they insist on that right in one instance, how can NBC in this case, enter into an arrangement to produce documentaries where the principle involved will insist, and quite rightly from his point of view, on giving his version of events as he saw them at any particular time he occupied high office? And if he insists on his point of view being retained, and it is retained, then is the result a news documentary or is it merely a platform for the particular view of a particular past President?

I am not questioning President Ford's interest or his right to enter into this arrangement with NBC, but I am questioning whether Schlosser and the other NBC officials realize the long-term implications of such arrangements on the independence of NBC News. I think they have made a bad error in judgment that eventually will cause trouble for a news department that tries to insist on the independence of the news judgments it is called upon daily to make.